Arabic Plural System

نظام الجموع العربية – الجمع السالم و جموع التكسير

Regular and irregular plural - spoken and written Arabic

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Test edition, Damascus 2000

Introduction

The Arabic plural system, especially the irregular plural, is one of the most problematic parts of the language for the non-native students of Arabic, and they keep complaining about it all the time. On the other side, Arab students don't have this problem in general, because they learn most of this system from their spoken Arabic, which they learn passively (spontaneously or unsystematically) as they grow up and expand their vocabulary in schools where also they learn passively how to use written Arabic in speaking, (in my observations, I noticed that the Arab child until ten to twelve years he or she uses feminine plural –suffix – ات for most of the plurals). On the other hand, grammar books are not much help. Simply, because they are completely based on medieval- classical grammar books which did not pay enough attention to the plural system. The reason could be first; the system was well known to almost every Arab and probably looked natural. Second, that means it was not controversial part of the language or the grammar, and classical books cared most about literary controversies, language and dialectical debates particularly concerning poetry and Islamic heritage. In this game, the foreign student seems to be left helpless.

As result, the books do not mention the plural system or they do, but too briefly, the Arabs including Arabic teachers offer no system about it (broken plural!), and the only available option is facing several years of collecting thousands of words through which one will be surprised by finding out this system very slowly and painfully.

Therefore, and in order to make it easy for non-native students to command this system in short time, I had to rely on my own efforts to a great extent and work hard to collect thousands of words in order to find out, classify, put together and systemize the rules of the "irregular plurals" and support them with long lists in which they become clear and easily accessible, putting into consideration the development of Modern Standard Arabic M.S.A. –in vocabulary- in the last two centuries and kinds of controversies it has created in the way i.e. you would find two Arabic teachers arguing fruitlessly for hours (like two clergymen form two different religions) about two plurals for the same word.

As for the regular plurals, which is the easy part, paradoxically, it occupies remarkable space in Arabic grammar references and that makes the two suffixes " ون and " ين known by everyone as masculine plural but still, they keep making mistakes including the highly educated people about which suffix to choose, because that depends on the plural syntactic position if it is nominative, accusative or genitive. In this respect, knowing the syntax- sentence structure is most important. Feminine plural is very similar case but its problem is invisible, because the difference between nominative, accusative and genitive is only in the final short vowel, and short vowels are not written in normal texts. Spoken Arabic solved the problem of masculine plural by using one suffix ين for all cases: nominative, accusative and genitive.

After this introduction, it will be the regular blank patterns of the irregular plurals. This should become - after you study carefully the pattern with their examples - your one-page guide for the whole system. The form, which means here the word internal structure, and the form change were given a central attention due to the fact that it is the way the word is recognized, changed and/or understood. Therefore, the form was heavily illustrated with big shapes, colors, explanation, and categorization. Each form starts with a big colored shape of the singular (on the right). The red letters in it represent what is added to the root (the root is the trilateral base form of the word in Arabic and Semitic languages), so it became a singular meaningful word (here, student can discover a unique subsystem). Next to singular, you find the plural form

also colored in a big shape. The red letters here show what's added to the singular form and made it plural. Below these exemplary forms, which we can call them the symbolic shape or the blank patterns (because they themselves do not normally make sense, because they can represent any word according to the changeable-unchangeable parts) are the examples, which are first, plenty to give the reader a firm idea about the form and its rhythm. Second, they are translated to get the reader involved (and maybe have critical attitude towards the explanation) in figuring out what each group could have in common concerning the meaning not only the form. Third, the examples were chosen from the most common vocabulary to look familiar to the advanced user or increase his or her useful vocabulary if the user is intermediate. To the left of the example list, there is the explanation that tells in plain text (while the colored blank forms explain visually) the change in the form or how to make it plural. The second point in the explanation is the meaning. which tries to generalize to find out any shared meaning of the group i.e. certain forms are mostly human adjectives, professions, names of tools, nouns for place etc. This is very helpful, predictable and shows interesting subsystem in Arabic, but sometimes controversial and open to interpretation. The third point in the explanation is the comments, which includes any useful tips.

Concerning the problem of having more than one plural for one word, it sometimes makes sense when the word has more than one meaning, and for each, there is a different plural i.e. the word **عامل**, when it means "worker" its plural is **عمّال** , when it means "factor" its plural is **عوامل** , and when it is an adjective, it means "in use or working" (here it becomes regular plural, including the fact that when it is adjective for non-human plural, it takes the form of feminine singular) **الموجات العاملة** used frequencies,**الطبقة العاملة** ،(the working class), and **الموظفون العاملون في قطاع الصحة** the employees working in health sector. The problem becomes unintelligible when there is no reason for having more than one plural to the same word. It does not add anything to the meaning (that is probably due to the elitism in M.S.A. For example, the word **موضوع**, its plural is both **موضوعات** and **مواضيع** . In this case, I just put the additional plural next to the one that could fit better without any comment about what's correct since both are common. This case, I think, is part of the real irregular plural.

Exercises also occupied some space here in order to activate the student. In every form there is one or two words were given in either plural or singular form only. The student can test his or her understanding by completing them. In addition, one or two lines in every group were left blank so student can collect more plurals from his own experience, classify and fill them in. When being able to do this, the student proves a mastery of the plural system.

The blank patterns:

- فعل – أفعال: قلم
- فعل – فعال: جبل
- فعل – فعول: فصل
- فعل – أفعلاء: قوي
- فعل – فعلان: صبي

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- فعلة – فعل: صورة
- فعلة - ~ ات: كلمة

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- فاعل - فعّال: كاتب
- فاعل - فواعل: شارع
- فاعل – فعال: قاضي
- فاعل – فعلاء: عالم

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- فاعلة – فواعل: قاعدة

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- مفعل – مفاعل: مركز

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- مفعلة – مفاعل: مدرسة

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- فعيل – فعلاء: أمير
- فعيل- أفعلاء: طبيب

- فعيل- فعلى: مريض

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- فعيلة- فعائل: حقيقة
- فعيلة- فعالى: قضية
- فعيلة - فعل: طريقة

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- فعال- فعل: كتاب
- فعال – أفعلة: جهاز

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- فعّال- ~ ين: بقال
- فعّال - ~ ات: حمّام

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- فاعول- فواعيل: قاموس

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- مفعول- مفاعيل: موضوع

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- مفعال- مفاعيل: ميدان

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- افتعال- ~ات: اجتماع

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- استفعال- ~ات: استثناء

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- فعلجي - ~ة: كهربجي

1. فعل - أفعال

أعلام	flag علم
أنهار	river نهر
أجسام	body جسم
أشخاص	person شخص
أفراد	single, individual فرد
أشكال	form, shape, kind شكل
أديان	religion دين
أخبار	news item خبر
أعمار	age عمر
أخوال	uncle خال
أسواق	market, souk سوق
أبواب	door, gate باب
أنواع	kind, sort نوع
أقلام	pen قلم
أقسام	part, piece, department, section قسم
	danger, risk خطر
أكياس	Sack, bag
	price سعر

Form change: takes initial *hamza* (أ) and *alef* (ا) before the last letter.
Meaning:
Noun, both physical and conceptual.
Comments:
* The first letter in singular could take the short vowel *fat-ha*, *damma* or *kasra*.
* This plural is not very common in spoken Arabic since the *hamza* is not used often in spoken. Spoken uses the next form (فعل- فعال) instead.

2. فعل - فعال

جمال	camel جمل
جبال	mountain جبل
قلام	pen قلم
كياس	Sack, bag كيس
صعاب	difficulty صعب
	dog كلب

Form change:
Three letters, the singular is written the same like its root (in classical Arabic dictionary e.g. no suffixes, no prefixes etc.) The plural takes the letter "*alef*" (ا) between the second letter and the third, which means before the last letter. This is true even if the singular is feminine.
Meaning:
Noun, mostly physical

fruit ثمرة	**ثمار- ثمرات**
neck رقبة	رقاب

3. فعل - فعول

Form change:
Three letters, the singular is written the same like its root and the plural takes the letter "*wow*" (و) before the last letter.
Meaning:
Noun, mostly physical, mostly non-human.

people شعب	شعوب
leather, skin جلد	جلود
full moon بدر	بدور
(s) flower زهر	**زهور-زهرات**
eye, spring عين	عيون
monster وحش	وحوش
field حقل	حقول
grave قبر	قبور
plain سهل	سهول
bridge جسر	جسور
plate, dish صحن	صحون
season, فصل chapter, academic term	فصول
letter حرف	**حروف – أحرف**
sea, ocean بحر	**بحور – بحار**
test, exam فحص	فحوص
falcon نسر	نسور
eagle صقر	صقور

Form change:
Three letters, but the second is doubled (with *shadda* ّ)
Everything else is the same as the previous form.

dam سد	سدود
limit, barrier, حد frontier, border	حدود
grandfather جد	**جدود- أجداد**
chick خد	خدود
doubt, شك suspicion	شكوك
right حق	حقوق
split شق	شقوق

response رد	ردود
art فن	فنون
solution حل	حلول
hill تل	**تلول – تلال**
line خط	
text نص	

4. فعل – أفعلاء

guardian وصي	أوصياء
rich, غني wealthy, needless	أغنياء
strong, قوي powerful	أقوياء
smart, ذكي clever	أذكياء
stupid غبي	أغبياء
wealthy ثري	أثرياء
prophet نبي	أنبياء
sacred man, ولي responsible, guardian	أولياء
~ ة	~ ات

Form change:
Three letters, but the last letter is always *yaa* ي. In plural, it takes initial *alef* أ and final *alef* with *hamza* ء.
Meaning:
Noun, human.

5. فعل – فعلان

boy صبي	صبيان
young man فتى	فتيان
bull ثور	ثيران
brave شجاع	شجعان

Form change:
Three letters, but the last letter is always *yaa* ي. The plural takes final *alef* and *non* ان . When the last letter is *alefmaqsora* ى, it becomes *ya* ي in plural (فتى- فتيان).

6. فعلة - فعل

sentence, جملة group, whole sale	جمل
excuse حجة	حجج
room, غرفة chamber	غرف
hole حفرة	حفر
story, fiction قصة	قصص
nation أمة	أمم
piece قطعة	قطع
wisdom, حكمة	حكم

Form change:
Three letters plus the feminine ending *tamarbota* ة . The plural loses the *tamarbota*. When the second letter in singular is doubled with *shadda* (حجّة), it returns to two separate letters in plural (حجج).

	maxim, saying, proverb
تحف	masterpiece, تحفة antique
صور	picture, photo, صورة image
قمم	top, peak, قمة summit
دول	state, دولة government
علب	box, can, علبة container
نسخ	copy نسخة
شمع- شمعات	**candle شمعة**
	apartment شقة

.7 فعلة - ~ ات

فتحات	hole, فتحة opening
رحلات	trip, tour رحلة
أكلات	kind of food, أكلة dish
شغلات	matter, شغلة thing, work
وقفات	stand, وقفة ،position
نومات	sleeping نومة
طبخات	kind of طبخة food, cocking
فرحات	joy, فرحة pleasure
كلمات	word, كلمة speech

.8 فاعل - فعّال

ثوّار	revolutionary, ثائر radical
تجّار	merchant, تاجر trader